

Summary of the 37th edition of Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN37), October 2014

Threat level

The threat level remains 'substantial', meaning that the chance of an attack is real. The Dutch intelligence and security services, however, have no specific indications to suggest that an attack will take place in the Netherlands.

The threat posed by jihadist movements in the West, and therefore in the Netherlands, has become clearer in the period under review. Individual jihadists in the West may resort to acts of violence in their own country, without ever having been to Syria or any other jihadist conflict zone. This appears to have been the case in Canada, where on two occasions in October 2014 jihadists who had become radicalised in their own country carried out attacks on military personnel. A terrorist plot in Australia which was foiled in September 2014 also involved an ISIS sympathiser who intended to commit acts of violence. It is conceivable that in the Netherlands, too, jihadist sympathisers could develop into lone wolf terrorists.

The current escalating violence between the West and ISIS contributes to this conceivable threat. The recent military campaign by the United States and a number of allies (including the Netherlands) to combat ISIS may serve as a catalyst for jihadist groups – including ISIS – or individuals to push ahead with planned attacks. The violence, and ISIS's calls for further attacks, may encourage seriously radicalised jihadists to commit similar acts of violence in the West. The jihadist attacks on military personnel in Canada in October 2014 can be seen in this light.

The Netherlands' participation in the military coalition fighting ISIS in Iraq will have raised the Netherlands' profile among jihadists. The reaction of Dutch jihadists in Syria or their sympathisers in the Netherlands to the American offensive and Dutch participation in it may develop into a threat to the Netherlands or its interests abroad. Calls to attack the West, like those issued by ISIS spokesman al-Adnani and JaN leader al-Julani, may inspire jihadists who have remained in the Netherlands to resort to violence. Similar calls to violence are now being heard from Dutch nationals in the combat zone as well.

Besides this 'domestic' threat, jihadist travellers and returnees are an important factor in assessing the current threat. Dutch jihadists are still travelling to the Middle East to join jihadist terrorist networks in Syria and possibly Iraq. A number of Dutch jihadists have been there for a considerable period of time. Western jihadists trained in Syria or Iraq – including

Dutch nationals – may be ordered by the al Qa’ida core, ISIS, JaN or other groups to carry out attacks in the West or against Western interests elsewhere. Returning jihadists may also more or less independently decide to carry out an attack in their own country or elsewhere, as was the case with the French national who targeted the Jewish museum in Brussels in May 2014.

Although politicians and the media are focusing strongly on ISIS (also referred to as IS or ISIL), the international terrorist threat is broader and more diffuse. Various jihadist terrorist groups – the al Qa’ida core, al Qa’ida affiliates like Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) and AQAP (Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula) and ISIS, which broke away from al Qa’ida – have for some time had the intention to carry out attacks on the West, possibly including the Netherlands. These terrorist groups operate via transnational networks consisting of jihadists residing both in the West and in the Middle East and North Africa. Dutch nationals are also part of these networks. The continuing discord within the jihadist movement between the al Qa’ida core and ISIS may serve to increase the threat. ISIS is currently dominant, in terms of propaganda, funding and recruitment of fighters. The al Qa’ida core could use a large-scale attack as a way to restore its former standing among jihadists. But other jihadist splinter groups in the Arab world or elsewhere could also mount an attack for similar reasons.

International context

ISIS’s proclamation of a ‘caliphate’ has increased the divisions within the worldwide jihadist movement. Established jihadist groups reject the caliphate, but this stance is leading to internal divisions, because some of these groups’ fighters do support ISIS. While the jihadists are concerned about these divisions, there are currently no indications of reconciliation.

ISIS has gained a great deal of ground in the past months. This has weakened JaN’s position in the Syrian conflict zone. Some local groups, previous affiliated with JaN, have defected to ISIS, and JaN has also lost territory to ISIS. As a result, pressure is mounting on JaN to take more of a stand. ISIS currently controls a large area covering parts of Iraq and Syria where, according to them, the official national borders no longer exist and they are beginning to build a state. The ‘caliphate’ proclaimed in late June 2014 is thus taking a more concrete shape. ISIS applies harsh tactics to convert people in the areas it controls. Christian minorities, non-Sunni Muslims and even Sunni Kurds are forced to submit to ISIS or else leave. ISIS uses extreme violence against civilians (Christians and non-Sunni Muslims) and opponents, which has led to massive refugee flows. In both Iraq and Syria,

ISIS is now being attacked by a coalition of countries led by the US. It is as yet unclear what effect this will have on ISIS's capabilities and the 'caliphate'.

In response to the US airstrikes in Iraq, ISIS has beheaded American journalists and British nationals, but this has only led the United States to step up its military campaign. The international fight against ISIS will motivate this group to act on its threats against the US and the other countries involved in the fight against ISIS. The military intervention is therefore increasing the threat, not only against the US, but against the West in general. ISIS has Westerners among its ranks whom it can order to commit terrorist acts against the West.

Developments in the Middle East are occurring so rapidly that we are at risk of losing sight of other regional conflicts and related jihadist violence. Countries bordering Iraq and Syria, such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon, are faced with the ongoing spill-over effects of the conflicts there. Saudi Arabia fears the growing influence of jihadists resulting from ISIS's advance and the many thousands of Saudis who are attracted to the violent ideas of ISIS, JaN or AQAP. After a long period of militia violence, Libya has developed into a haven for jihadists in North Africa. Various jihadist groups, including Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), operate from Libya and wreak violence and cause instability in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Mali. AQAP maintains its striking power in Yemen, despite a military offensive by the Yemeni government. In the Horn of Africa, the US killed the leader of terrorist organisation al Shabaab. It does not seem likely, however, that this will end the widespread violence committed by the group in Somalia and Kenya. In Nigeria, too, military action by the government – even with Western assistance – appears to be insufficient to stamp out jihadist group Boko Haram. In Afghanistan, the Taliban is gaining more and more ground. Under pressure from ISIS's successes, the al Qa'ida core has again been seeking closer cooperation with the Taliban. At the same time, al Qa'ida is trying to expand its influence in southern Asia by establishing a new branch: Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

International dynamics

The autumn of 2014 is seeing an intensification of the dynamic underlying conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, the jihadist groups operating there and jihadist movements in the West. Jihadist groups are benefiting from regional conflicts in those areas and operating with renewed confidence. ISIS's emergence attracts sympathisers from all over the world. Young jihadists have further modernised their rhetoric and make full use of social media. The jihadist world view still appears to have an appeal for individuals living in Western democracies. This has led to a situation in which the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa continuously contribute to the proliferation of jihadist ideals and the revival of jihadist

movements worldwide, and vice versa. Western government action against jihadism and the recent escalation of violence between the West and jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq appear to be accelerating these dynamics rather than tempering them.

International threat against Europe, North America and Australia

The threat to Europe, North America and Australia posed by jihadist circles has increased somewhat in the period under review. The further internationalisation of the conflict in Iraq and Syria contributes to the threat, due to factors like the provision of weapons by European countries to Kurds in northern Iraq and the international offensive against ISIS. Moreover, the composition of groups of fighting jihadists reflects a certain internationalisation. According to estimates by think-tanks and academic institutions, between 12,000 and 20,000 foreign nationals from around 80 countries have travelled to the Syrian conflict zone. They include around 3,000 persons from Europe, more than 300 of whom are said to have returned to Europe.

Since the attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014, in the period under review arrests have been the main visible manifestation of the threat. Terrorism suspects were arrested in the Netherlands and other countries, including Austria, France, Germany and Spain. Generally speaking, the arrests involved persons who had been to Syria, were planning to travel to Syria or were thought to have provided financial support to terrorist organisations. In Norway there was a brief ISIS-related terrorist threat in late July 2014. In September, Australian authorities foiled two separate terrorist plots, which both could be linked to ISIS or ISIS supporters. In early October, police in the UK foiled an ISIS-related plot.

There have been examples of jihadist attacks in the West which are probably linked to the internationalisation of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. These include two attacks on military personnel in Canada in October by suspected jihadists, in which two soldiers were killed.

Threat to the Netherlands

Over the past few months, the threat of attacks in the Netherlands has become more conceivable. While that threat is not limited to persons who have travelled to Syria, it is closely linked with the conflict in Syria and Iraq and its internationalisation. Following the airstrikes, which killed three Dutch nationals, several Dutch jihadists in Syria made threats to the Dutch government. Calls by these jihadists to commit violence may also inspire jihadists who have not travelled abroad to carry out an attack in the Netherlands. A contributing factor in this respect is the fact that the policy on jihadism presented in September 2014 (Jihadism

Action Plan) may lead to negative responses in individual cases. In view of similar incidents in other countries, it is conceivable that jihadists whose plans have been thwarted by the government could vent their frustration by committing acts of violence in the Netherlands.

Jihadist travel to Syria remains an important factor in the current threat assessment. It is clear that this combat zone continues to hold an appeal for Dutch jihadists. The steady increase in the number of jihadist travellers seen in the previous DTN period has continued, with the number now totalling around 160 over the past two years. As far as we know, 18 have died, some in the airstrikes by the international coalition or in violence within the jihadist groups. Around 30 have returned to the Netherlands. There are currently around 100 Dutch nationals still in the combat zone, including about 30 women. It is worth noting that the growth in the number of returnees has stagnated in 2014. This may indicate that the jihadists travellers still in the combat zone are motivated to continue the fight or to establish themselves in an 'Islamic state' for a long period of time.

Dutch jihadists in the region are currently active in at least three jihadist combat groups: with most joining JaN or ISIS, and a smaller group fighting with Jund al-Aqsa (JaA). Although most of the Dutch jihadist travellers are in Syria, there may be an increasing number of Dutch nationals in Iraq. Some Dutch nationals who become involved in these groups may – after receiving instruction in jihadist ideology and the use of weapons – become involved in preparations for attacks in or against the West. As Dutch nationals stay in the region for longer periods of time, the possibility increases that they will gain combat experience and training, which heightens the threat this group constitutes. The Western interventions against ISIS lead to a greater focus on the West, and therefore possibly also on the Netherlands. In this light it is conceivable that Dutch nationals with combat experience, who have trained and become radicalised in Syria, will at some point be deployed elsewhere to further the international agenda of jihadist organisations.

The arrest in Amsterdam on 15 October of a Moroccan national who was suspected of ISIS-inspired terrorist intentions against the police confirms the transnational nature of the jihadist threat.

Violent radicalisation and polarisation

ISIS's recent advance in parts of northern Iraq and Syria, which has been marked by the brutal oppression of ethnic and religious minorities in the region, is heightening sectarian and ethnic tensions in the Middle East and beyond. In the Netherlands these tensions are manifested in pro- and anti-ISIS demonstrations. In October it became clear that the

involvement of Kurdish minorities in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq is leading to fierce responses from various Kurdish communities in the Netherlands and other European countries.

Another example of polarisation emerged during the violent escalation between Israel and Hamas in August. The Israeli military operation 'Protective Edge' led to a worldwide wave of protests and incidents, some violent. In the Netherlands, pro-Palestinian demonstrations mainly focused on the large number of civilian casualties in Gaza, rather than on Jews or the existence of the state of Israel. At the time, anti-Semitic voices were heard during the demonstrations, including those in the Netherlands.

Confrontations between *ihadists and right-wing extremists* in the Schilderswijk area of The Hague in August 2014 showed that violent clashes between these ideological groups are no longer unthinkable. It is, however, a new phenomenon in the Netherlands. Germany and the UK have already seen violent confrontations between Islamists and far-right activists. Actions by the far right may also lead to renewed and possibly violent confrontations between the far left and the far right.

After a year of relatively few illegal protest activities by *asylum rights extremists*, the period under review again witnessed a number of intimidating 'home visits'. In July 2014, messages were daubed on the homes of the managing director of the G4S security firm and an executive of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. There were similar instances in October. This shows that hard-core asylum rights extremists are still prepared to carry out illegal protest activities against what they perceive as an inhumane asylum policy.

Resilience

The escalating violence in the Middle East, the perceived threat from jihadism and the vast amount of media coverage of ISIS have sparked fear among parts of the Dutch population.

On the other hand, people in the Netherlands are generally resistant to extremist arguments that seek to justify violence on ideological grounds. There are seldom violent incidents which are fuelled by ideological factors. Support for extremist groups remains limited.

The fact that the jihadist narrative has often been refuted or ignored by the Muslim communities in the Netherlands in the period under review is a positive development. Various groups and individuals have condemned ISIS's excessive violence. During the recent war in Gaza, Dutch jihadists had little success in linking up with the 'mainstream'

supporters of Palestine, despite various attempts, both online and in the real world. In Europe, too, there have been signs of resistance from Muslim organisations and individuals to the jihadist narrative.

Government countermeasures

The jihadist threat has led to increased national and international counterterrorism measures and anti-jihadist policies in the West. In the Netherlands, too, existing measures are being supplemented and enhanced to counter the realistic threat described above. Police operations and the efforts of the judicial authorities have led to several arrests and thwarted attempts to travel to conflict zones. For the time being, this seems to have disrupted jihadist propaganda in the Netherlands. It is too early to observe and assess any other possible effects of national and international efforts against ISIS.

A factor which requires attention is the role jihadists who have been prevented from leaving the country by the authorities may play in jihadist plots against the West. In France and Australia, jihadists were arrested on suspicion of seeking to carry out an attack *after* they had been prevented from going abroad. Both of the persons who carried out the attacks in Canada in October were said to have been prevented from departing the country by the authorities. Nonetheless, many Western governments, including that of the Netherlands, choose to stop would-be jihadist travellers from going to Syria or elsewhere, as this can help prevent them from radicalising further, gaining combat experience and linking up with terrorist organisations in the Middle East. Moreover, in their own countries Western authorities have more options for exercising control.